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**THE
HAUNTED SENTRY BOX
OF
PORTO RICO**

**BY
LEWIS MILLER**



HAUNTED SENTRY BOX, SAN CRISTOBAL, SAN JUAN

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By

Lewis Miller



DIRECTLY below the old fort of San Cristobal, in San Juan, Porto Rico, projecting out over the sea from a corner of the sea wall, is a sentry box. Years ago a sentry, placed on duty at this lonely post, utterly disappeared, leaving behind only his musket and side-arms. His disappearance was so mysterious that it was attributed to sea-devils, and the sentry box has ever since been given a wide berth by all superstitious natives.

The same night of this strange incident, a priest, the best liked and most admired of his sect in the city, disappeared. The only clue discovered in regard to his disappearance

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was the small gold cross, which constantly hung suspended from a chain around his neck, found before the door of the corner sentry box.

I heard many stories in regard to the disappearance of these two, but all were too preposterous to allow any thought of truth. At last, however, good luck brought me into the presence of a man who knew, and it is the story as I heard it from him which I am undertaking to recount.

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The proprietor of one of the "tiendas" in Mayaguez, Juan Cordo by name, was a large, jovial old man full of stories of wild adventure, with which every Saturday night he entertained a gathering composed chiefly of the working men, who, their work over for the week, were ready to listen to any tale which would entertain them—and the old storekeeper was a good talker. It was at one of these gatherings, to which I was frequently drawn by a desire to hear the old man's ramblings, that I heard the story of the haunted sentry box.

As usual, the old fellow, who loved to be

urged, could for sometime think of nothing to tell about, but he finally decided on his subject and settling back in his chair, began. I noticed, however, that he carefully scrutinized the faces of his audience, that is, of all except one. But this one was really of little importance as he was a late arrival in town and scarcely known to any one. As I have said, his face was free from the scrutinizing eye of old Juan Cordo, for, coming in late, he had quietly seated himself behind the story-teller without attracting his attention.

“My story begins back in the early seventies,” began the old man in a thoughtful and his usual hesitating tone. “The capital was the scene of crimes, of immorality and of all sorts of disorders. There were good men, of course, but even these were often corrupted. An instance of this was young Pedro Delvarez, a soldier, who had enlisted in the army when he was but seventeen. He had had chances which most of his associates had not—fine parents, an education, money; but he proved unworthy of them all. He turned to gambling and fast living, finally marrying a young girl, far below him in social rank, who married him merely for his money. His love for this girl, however, partly cured

him of his wild life and helped him to be a better fellow.

“Although he might have had an officer’s rank through his father’s influence, he had enlisted as a mere common soldier due to some fool book-notion of working his way up. But his habits retarded his progress and at the end of six years of service he found himself still in the ranks. He made many enemies among his rough associates and chief among them was a great, strong, dastardly fellow named Torcas.”

There was a stir behind the old storekeeper as the stranger leaned forward with a gleam of interest in his eyes, but I thought with a twitching of anger around his mouth. The old man apparently did not hear him for he continued without looking around.

“How this enmity began I do not know, but it increased daily and finally reached the boiling point when Torcas ran off with the flighty young wife of his enemy. Young Delvarez was heart-broken and attempted suicide, but was luckily saved from such an untimely death through the intervention of good Padre Suarez. This priest had for some reason or other taken a great liking to the young soldier and had endeavoured in

every way to help him. It was due to the efforts of his clerical friend that Delvarez was led back into the straight road and it was the kindly advice of this same person which kept him from a search for, and probably the murder of, his enemy.

“Life became a mere dream to the young fellow, who went to his soldier’s duties, morose, bitter against the world, and shunning his companions who he thought detested him. He continued in this way for several months till one night a crisis was reached. He had been stationed on duty at the old sentry box with the accusation of ‘murder’ ringing in his ears. A few minutes before, in a quarrel, his antagonist had accused him of it; the murder of the young, fickle wife, who, the preceding morning, had been found dead in her bed. He was innocent, but he had no friends to take his side in case the law was against him, and he had no proofs of innocence. While he stood looking out over the sea, contemplating his troubles, he felt a hand placed on his shoulder and turning quickly could just discern in the darkness the face of the kindly padre.

“It was a wild night and the noise of the sea and wind made hearing difficult, so that

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he could scarcely understand the priest as he leaned forward and shouted in his ear: 'I feel sure you're innocent' said the priest, 'but the others don't seem to think so. So slip over the wall here and get away; it's your only chance because they're coming for you soon. Go to some other place, live a clean, decent life, but remember, if you ever come up against that fellow Torcas don't do anything, for God will take vengeance on him.' "

Again there was a stir behind the storyteller as the stranger leaned forward with the interest in his eyes gleaming brighter than before, while the twitching of anger around his mouth seemed to have changed to a slight smile. Again the old man, unconscious of the interest he was arousing, continued:

"The good fellow had just finished speaking when a pistol shot rang out and a bullet burned a furrow across Delvarez's breast to bury itself in his friend's. Delvarez sank to the ground, but the rain quickly revived him and he got up, the wound on his breast, which was to trouble him through life, burning and throbbing. At first he thought he was again alone, but his foot encountered something, and stooping over he found the body of the dead priest.

Suddenly he recalled his friend's advice and determined to flee.

"Feverishly he undressed himself and exchanged clothing with the dead man. Next he laid his firearms on the little bench which ran around the sentry box, threw the body over the wall, and lowered himself down carefully after it. There was a spade at the foot of the wall, the presence of which at that time he did not stop to analyze; but later, when thinking over the events of that night, he determined it had been brought there to be used on him as he used it on the dead priest. With it he dug a deep hole where he laid the body of his only friend. Then he fled away into the night.

"It was quite late when he reached the little house which he had bought when he married, and he was tired, but he thought he would now probably be accused of two murders, so he must get away. He changed quickly into his most ragged clothes and started off towards another city. How he fared for the next few years I shall not attempt to relate, but under an assumed name, and with the power of his early home-training and education, he slowly forged to the front. He heard the stories of the

haunted sentry box and was pleased that his disappearance had been so explained.

“ Although to all outward appearance he was poor, his new life brought him money and in the solitude of his little home he lived in comfort. He likewise deceived the world as to his feelings; to his friends he seemed a jovial, care-free fellow, but at home he sank back into bitterness and thoughts of his wrongs. His thoughts often turned to Torcas, but he just as frequently turned them aside through a desire to follow the last words of his murdered friend.

“ It was not until years later when the world had nearly banished all thought of the sentry box episode that Delvarez, now an old man, again saw his bitter enemy. Torcas, to his delight, did not recognize him and Delvarez immediately started to plan the death of his tormentor. He waited and waited, but the right time never seemed to come and finally the last words of the long-dead friend again began to take effect. Delvarez became calmer; he looked at the unrecognizing man with pure disdain and a great confidence arose in him that his friend’s words would come true, that God—— ”

The story was interrupted by the stranger

behind the old story-teller. With a gurgling cry of wrath he had sprung to his feet, his right hand, tightly clenched about the handle of a gleaming knife, shot upward, while his left hand tore the shirt from the storekeeper's shoulders, thus uncovering the old man's chest, which had a dark red scar across it. The knife started downward with terrific force toward Cordo's bared body, but not into it, for he, with a quick, instinctive, upward throw of his arm, so changed the course of the blade that it buried itself to the hilt in its owner's breast.

The priest had spoken the truth: God had taken vengeance.

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